

Trawler!





*No. "459" looked like a trawler,
but so did the other ship
a month before, and that one had been a
North Vietnamese supply ship.*

At 1925 on 11 July 1967, the pilot of patrol aircraft No. 10, Patrol Squadron One, reported to Market Time Coastal Surveillance Center in Da Nang that he had contact with a small steel-hulled trawler headed on a course of 220 degrees, at a speed of 10 knots, and located 55 miles east of Chu Lai. That information in itself was enough to send CSC to "General Quarters." Any ship which closes the South Vietnam shoreline on a perpendicular course is suspect. The P2 had flown low enough to read the numerals "459" on the trawler's bow. The pilot had reported further that the unmarked trawler had a "large crate on deck" and was running dark. The sun had just set, so that "running dark" was not necessarily unusual. At CSC, the trawler was plotted on the Market Time tactical plot. Her track was projected to determine which ship in the barrier patrol should be vectored to intercept. The U. S. radar picket escort ship, *Wilhoite* (DER-397) was steaming on the southern barrier at a point where the trawler's projected track crossed the barrier line and, thus, was directed to "maintain present station until further ordered."

An hour later, the P2 returned to check on the trawler and found that she had turned on her running lights and had changed course to 120 degrees, a significantly suspicious action. With this move, the *Wilhoite* was ordered to close and make contact, but to observe covertly. The *Wilhoite* pursued, made radar contact, and, after a careful handoff from the aircraft, took over the duties of

by Commander
Charles R. Stephan,
U. S. Navy

shadowing the trawler. For good measure, however, the relief aircraft, No. 7, continued to track during the night. After daylight next morning, the *Wilhoite* was ordered to close for an identification run and to take pictures. The aircraft did likewise. The *Wilhoite* reported a dark green trawler about 120 feet long with the bow number 459. Fishing gear and nets were distributed topside. There was no sign of a crate. No identification or indication of nationality was visible, and the three men on deck paid no attention to the ship as she made a circle around the freighter, then headed off over the horizon to resume radar tracking. The trawler carried no radar or any other visible sophisticated electronics equipment.

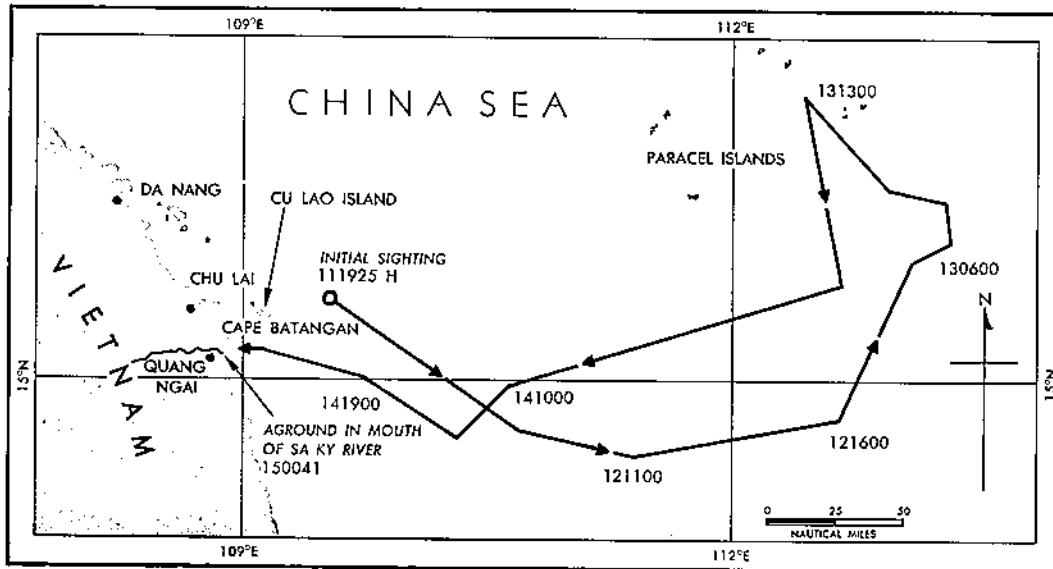
At Saigon, the Market Time Task Force Commander directed the *Wilhoite* to continue covert surveillance "all the way back to Haiphong, if necessary." It was anticipated that the trawler's captain would probably resume his infiltration attempt when he thought he had shaken off his pursuers. During the night he had taken an easterly course, to a location southeast of the Paracel Islands. He then turned north and steamed up to a point where, at 1300 on the 13th, he anchored for three hours, then got underway and started to retrace his track. The *Wilhoite* held station just out of visual range. So it was that on the night of 13 July, 2300 by Da Nang time, the trawler appeared to be headed back for the area where she had been detected initially.

This was not the first such incident. Four months before, on 14 March 1967, another trawler had attempted to infiltrate this same area. Again, the trawler had been detected initially by Market Time patrol aircraft. In the ensuing hours, surface units of the Market Time force had taken station near the trawler and had forced her ashore. She had beached at about 0600 local time. In those latitudes, it is still very dark at that hour in March. While Market Time ships fired illumination rounds and suppressive fire at the beach to keep the trawler from being unloaded, plans were being made to board her. Suddenly, at 0630, the ship exploded with such cataclysmic violence that tiny pieces were scattered for a thousand yards in all directions. There was hardly enough of the ship

left to be recognizable. Not a single weapon on the trawler remained useable. There was little question, therefore, but that the July trawler was similarly rigged and could be expected to destroy herself if not captured before the crew could abandon her.

The staff of the Northern Surveillance Group, of which I had been designated the Commander, assembled late in the evening of the 13th when we were sure the trawler was returning to the Cape Batangan area and began planning for the operation that would almost surely take place the next night. The speed of the trawler at that time would have brought her ashore at about 2000 on the 14th, but this was ruled out as a possibility because the moon would still have been up, and though it was not yet full, it was too bright to risk being seen. It was reasoned that she would slow up during the late afternoon and try for the beach after moonset, a little after midnight. To disarm the destructive charge which the trawler probably carried, Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, was asked to provide an Explosive Ordnance Demolitions specialist.

That same evening the new U. S. gunboat *Gallup* (PG-85), had arrived for duty with the Northern Surveillance Group. She was to depart for patrol off the Quang Ngai coast the next day. With the very high speed available from the *Gallup's* turbine power, I decided to spend most of the day in Da Nang watching the movements of the trawler, complete plans for the operation, then leave late in the afternoon in time to transit in the *Gallup* to rendezvous with the *Wilhoite*, transferring to that ship as On Scene Commander. The *Wilhoite*, after nearly three days of tracking the trawler, had proven that her CIC and operations team was superb, as were her communications. The *Gallup's* participation in the operation was most welcome for several reasons. Her 3-inch and 40-mm. guns, would provide important firepower, her speed might be extremely useful in some unpredicted emergency, in addition to permitting a last-minute departure from Da Nang for the operation area, and, finally, the men of this new class of ship wanted, and deserved, a chance to prove her worth. At least two fast patrol boats (PCFs), known as Swift



boats, also would be desirable. The over-and-under .50-caliber machine gun/81-mm. mortar mounted on the fantail of these boats is a formidable weapon, especially when the mortar is fired in the direct, trigger-fired mode. The Swifts would have to be selected from those on patrol on either side of the trawler's track when the time came. When the planners secured, the trawler was still heading nearly along her D.R. track toward Cape Batangan. Next morning, they were delighted to learn that she was still on track.

It now became necessary to make sure that no Market Time units got in the way of the trawler to scare her off again. The patrol aircraft were called off, leaving the tracking job completely to the *Wilhoite*. Word went out to all Market Time and Republic of Vietnam Navy units in the southern I Corps area that a trawler was headed toward the beach and to stay clear of her unless ordered to engage. The commanding generals, of the III Marine Amphibious Force, the Second Brigade of the Republic of Korea Marine Corps, and the U. S. Army's Task Force Oregon, at Chu Lai were advised that a trawler was being tracked by Market Time units and might possibly beach in one of their tactical areas of responsibility (TAORs). Security forces on the beach would be required.

The NSG plan called for grouping the ships

astern of the trawler in such a way that she could turn neither left or right to escape, but would have to continue toward the beach.

At noon, the First Coastal Zone Psychological Operations Officer, Lieutenant "Pete" Reiling, recommended to the Task Group Commander that a PsyOps speaker-team be included in the operation to try to talk the trawler into surrendering.* He argued that the speaker team would also come in handy if the operation ever reached the boarding phase. Obviously, however, a 50-foot Swift boat would be too crowded to carry the speaker equipment and the four members of the team. It would be impossible to fight the boat with so much excess cargo on board. It would also be next to impossible to "daisy chain," by way of patrol boats, all that gear and people down to the Quang Ngai area from Da Nang and expect it to be working when it got there. Even if they flew to Chu Lai and "daisy-chained" the rest of the way, it would be difficult. Too, whichever boat carried the speaker team would be in greater danger because she might have to close the trawler much nearer than any of the other units.

Pete countered these potential problems by suggesting that he and his team board a

* See V. G. Reiling, Jr., and G. W. Scott, "Psychological Operations in Vietnam," U. S. Naval Institute PROCEEDINGS, July 1968, pp. 122-134.

Market Time Coast Guard cutter (WPB) in Da Nang for the operation. The decision was made that if one of the cutters wanted to volunteer for the job, the speaker team could go. Pete departed to get his crew and gear ready, in the confident awareness that all the Coast Guard units in port would volunteer for the mission.

A short talk with the Commander Coast Guard Division 12, verified Pete's assurance, and the task of selecting the cutter for the job was quickly completed because the *Point Orient* (USCGC 82319) was just completing upkeep and was scheduled to go north on patrol the next day. Her commanding officer was briefed on how the speakers were to be used initially to challenge the trawler. The trawler's first inkling of enemy presence must be the spoken message requesting her to surrender. In the dark, it would be impossible for the trawler to take accurate aim on the sound source if her captain should decide to shoot at the WPB. If there was no reaction from the trawler after an appropriate period of repeating the taped message, the cutter was to fire illumination mortar rounds, still without giving the trawler a light source at which to take aim. If this did not bring a reaction from the trawler, the Swift and the cutter were to fire warning shots across her bow. If, after that, she continued to steam for the beach or attempted to evade her pursuers, she would be taken under fire.

The Psychological Operation team boarded the *Point Orient* just before she got underway at 1545 with orders to take station just south of Cu Lao Re Island, east of Chu Lai, to await the procession as it passed by headed for the beach.

At 1300, the EOD man arrived as requested. By that time it appeared that getting underway at 1700 in the *Gallup* would permit a rendezvous with the *Wilhoite* at dusk. During the afternoon, plans were smoothed up; station assignments for the units were encrypted for transmission later. Since there is always the danger of two trawlers trying to infiltrate simultaneously, all units were advised to be particularly alert. The southernmost Swifts were placed on a special barrier. The *Wilhoite* was ordered to move out onto the starboard bow of the trawler, still at covert range, in order to expedite the rendezvous

that was scheduled later that evening.

During the afternoon, orders arrived from the Task Force Commander to initiate challenge procedures when the trawler was five miles from the beach. Later he sent a message stating that the trawler had been positively identified—from the pictures taken by VP-1, plane No. 7—as a North Vietnamese resupply ship.

At 1715, the *Gallup* got underway, shifting to turbine power as soon as she had passed the deep water piers.

About an hour later, the *Gallup* passed the *Point Orient*. In order for the PsyOps team to test the range of their speaker system, the *Gallup* slowed down to about 20 knots and listened. An appropriate message had been taped after they had gotten underway and not only was it audible at 20 knots, but also it still could be heard when the *Gallup* went back up to 38 knots and resumed course to rendezvous with the *Wilhoite*.

At 2000, just after dark, the two ships met and the transfer was effected. The *Wilhoite's* captain had prepared his ship completely for boarding and hand-to-hand combat so that, if necessary, his ship could have tackled the entire job alone. The *Wilhoite* was ordered to take station five miles on the trawler's starboard quarter and the *Gallup* was ordered to make the long end-around run to get to the same position on the port quarter. The *Gallup*, using her turbine power, reached that position without delay.

At this time, the three ships were 22 miles east southeast of Cu Lao Re Island. The loom of the 12-mile light on the island was clearly visible. This powerful beacon is the main navigational aid in I Corps. Both the March and July trawlers undoubtedly had made landfall on it from far out at sea. The *Wilhoite's* CIC was tracking the trawler, the *Gallup* and the minesweeper *Pledge* (MSO-492)—which had moved to the southern barrier when the *Wilhoite* had begun her marathon tracking exercise—an LST headed north through the area ahead of the formation, plus a few other contacts. CIC was running the tactical and geographic plot on a second DRT. On this plot, a line had been drawn outlining the 12-mile contiguous area along the coast of the Republic of Vietnam. To this

plot was added a five-mile zone off the beach to define the area where the PsyOps challenges would start.

All eyes were on the LST which was passing through the area, headed north. Would the trawler shy away from her, thinking her to be a patrol unit? The lookouts reported that the LST was well lighted, so perhaps the trawler would recognize her for what she was, a transiting ship. To the south of the LST was the *Pledge*. Her commander requested permission to investigate a stationary contact just south of Cu Lao Re Island. Since he would have had to cross in front of the trawler formation, it was necessary to deny permission. Besides, he might be needed on the southern barrier to interdict a possible second trawler. Also anticipating possible contact with the trawler, the *Pledge* had been fully prepared for action. She, too, was completely ready to tackle the job single-handedly.

The U. S. destroyer *Walker* (DD-517), was on her night gunfire support station, just off the entrance to Song Tra Khuc, the river which enters Quang Ngai city, and about three miles south of the Sa Ky River, at the base of Cape Batangan—in a position to ruin the whole ambush at the last minute. CSC advised her of what was happening and asked her to move out of the way. By that time, she held our formation on radar and graciously moved south out of the way to stand by if needed.

At 2130, a second contact showed south of Cu Lao Re and became dead in the water. A few minutes later, the *Point Orient* reported at rendezvous point, at the location of this second contact.

The trawler decreased speed to eight knots. She was reacting to the passing LST. The LST passed about eight miles in front of the trawler, proceeding innocently north to Chu Lai. The trawler went back up to ten knots when the LST had passed.

During the hour from 2130 until 2230, the trawler made one or two slight course changes, one of which took her a little farther south of Cu Lao Re than had her initial track, but then she steadied down on a westerly course headed directly for the coastline south of Cape Bantangan. Shortly thereafter, a message was received from the Task Force Commander, advising that a VC "Re-

ception Committee" was waiting just up the Sa Ky river on its northern shore to offload the trawler. This bit of intelligence clinched the trawler's destination. Now it would be possible to select the Swift boat which would be closest to the track of the trawler, and therefore the one which was needed to fill the port quarter slot in the formation, since the *Point Orient* was scheduled to take the starboard quarter position. It was the *PCF-79*.

So, with all ships selected, at 2230 the encrypted station assignments were sent out, to be executed later on signal.

The trawler was now 25 miles from the beach. The *Point Orient* was still sitting up there south of Cu Lao Re, about nine miles north of the formation's track. Since the trawler's best speed was estimated at 15 knots and since the *Point Orient's* was only a few more than that, it became apparent that the cutter should begin taking station if she was to avoid a long stern chase. For this reason she was ordered to take station astern of the trawler at 3,000 yards, staying at least three miles from the trawler until aft of her beam. The *Wilhoite* and the *Gallup* were ordered to close to three miles.

After that, they just steamed, watching the trawler get closer and closer to that 12-mile line. Because it might be crucial should the trawler decide to turn away, the line was plotted again, more accurately. Excitement built up rapidly within the quiet, darkened CIC as the trawler was plotted closer and closer to the line. She steamed over the line and onward with no hesitation. At that time, 2330, all units were ordered to preassigned stations. The *Wilhoite* took station 20 degrees abaft the starboard beam of the trawler at 5,000 yards, the *Gallup* a similar station aft the port beam. The *Orient* and the *PCF-79* proceeded to stations on the starboard and port quarters respectively at 2,500 yards. All units went to General Quarters.

The Task Force Commander directed that suppressive fire be employed around the area in case the trawler beached. CSC suggested that gunfire support be arranged with the *Walker*. The Swift boat Division Commander (COMCOSDIV 16) at Chu Lai, volunteered helo gunships from Task Force Oregon to disperse the Reception Committee. He was

asked to have the gunships standing by on call, since the On Scene Commander felt that he could control them more effectively than the several other varieties of supporting arms which were available.

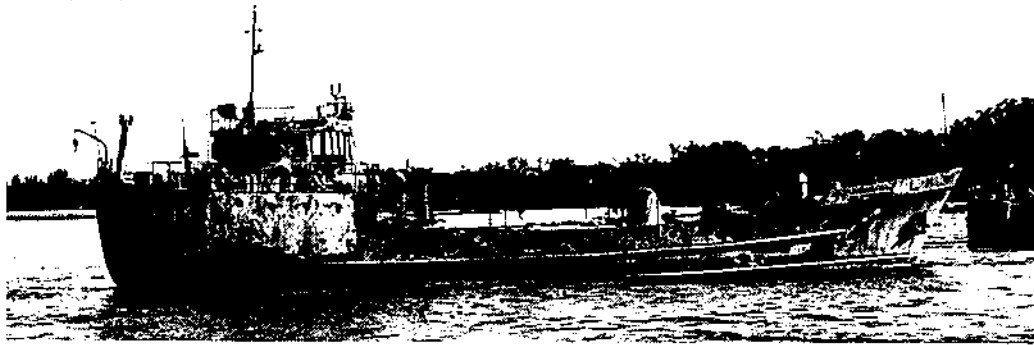
The *PCF-79* closed at high speed from the west, circling astern of the *Gallup* to get to station. She was still about 1,000 yards from station, boring in at full speed when the trawler crossed the five-mile line from the beach. It was 11 minutes after midnight, 15 July. The quarter moon was low in the west and had gone behind heavy clouds. The *Point Orient* was standing by to commence the tape broadcast. On order, the Vietnamese language broadcast began: "You must stop and don't shoot because you are surrounded! We knew clearly that you were coming here and we have been waiting for you for three days. You must quickly wake up to the fact and surrender. The government will be merciful."

The message was repeated again and again as the *Orient* closed to a range of 1,000 yards. The spoken challenge was to be used for five minutes before taking the next step. After his tape had been played several times, a Vietnamese Navy PsyOps Officer took the microphone and began pleading with the crew of the trawler to surrender. Earlier in the afternoon when Pete had asked this officer to come along "to help try to capture a trawler" he had reacted with a great deal of skepticism—not for the plan, but at the thought that we knew there was a trawler out there to be captured. During that afternoon and evening, as the tapes were prepared, his skepticism gave way to belief and then incredulity. When he saw the trawler on radar, his excitement was almost beyond containing. Imagine, then, his excitement—and everyone else's—when, at 0016, the *Orient* fired her first 81-mm. illumination round and there, big as life, before our eyes was the enemy trawler.

The *PCF-79* reached a mortar-firing position and began illuminating also, so that the trawler had continuous illumination during the next phase of the operation. After five full minutes of illumination and ten minutes of PsyOps, the *Orient* and the *PCF-79* were ordered to commence firing .50-caliber tracers across the infiltrator's bow. The silence and black of the night were shattered by the noise



as the red points of light formed a tight V in front of the trawler. Still, she made no attempt to slow down, stop, reply to the challenges, or do anything but bore onward toward the entrance to the Sa Ky River. After two or three minutes of warning fire, the *PCF-79*'s skipper reported "He's trying to escape up the river. Request permission to take him under fire." All criteria had been met to establish the trawler as the enemy and as an evading, hostile unit, even though she had not yet opened fire on the task unit. Permission was granted to commence firing. A call went out for the gunships from Task Force Oregon. The two small craft opened up immediately with an intense fire from their six .50-caliber machine guns and two mortars. The *Gallup* commenced fire with 3-inch VT frag—to suppress topside personnel on the trawler—and with her 40-mm. guns. The *Wilhoite* had to maneuver to avoid shallow water, then joined with her 3-inch and 40-mm. weapons. At about 0038, the *PCF-79* closed to 200 yards and fired a white phosphorus mortar round into the pilothouse of the trawler. A couple of minutes later, out of control, she grounded in the river mouth. While both of our small craft paused to reload machine guns, the trawler opened up on them with fire from her 12.7-mm. deck guns. Three rounds of 57-mm. recoilless were fired in the direction of the Swift boat. Both craft returned fire and suppressed the fire coming from the trawler. A high explosive mortar round went off in the pilothouse, followed by explosions of other mortar rounds fired into the superstructure of the trawler by the two units. The explosion blew out the starboard



The trawler was ablaze as the USS *Gallup* raked her with 3-inch and 40-mm. shells. At dawn, abandoned, her hull riddled, her fantail 12.7-mm. AA gun pointing skyward, she rested on a sandbar. Two LCM-8 boats, with the battered trawler lashed between them, headed for Chu Lai.

All photographs by Daniel H. Weber, PHAN



side pilothouse door, pinning down and killing one crew member who had been firing an AK-56.

A Task Force Oregon flare ship and two helo gunships arrived on station about the time the trawler grounded. They requested, and got, permission to join in the attack. The flare ship took over illumination responsibilities, while the gunships' rockets and red fingers of M-60 fire clawed across the trawler from one side to the other. All other units continued firing. The trawler had turned starboard side to her attackers after grounding. Fire from all units was effective and the trawler appeared to be burning from one end to the other.

The helo gunships were relieved on station by two others and the attack continued virtually unabated until 0115 when one of the advisors with the Korean Marine Corps called to announce that the ROKs were going to commence bombarding the area with their artillery to suppress any of the Reception Committee who might still be around. Since the seaborne units were on the extension of the Korean's gun target line, they had to move south out of the way. This resulted in their being far enough away that their fire was much less effective. For perhaps an hour the Korean artillery rounds fell fairly fre-

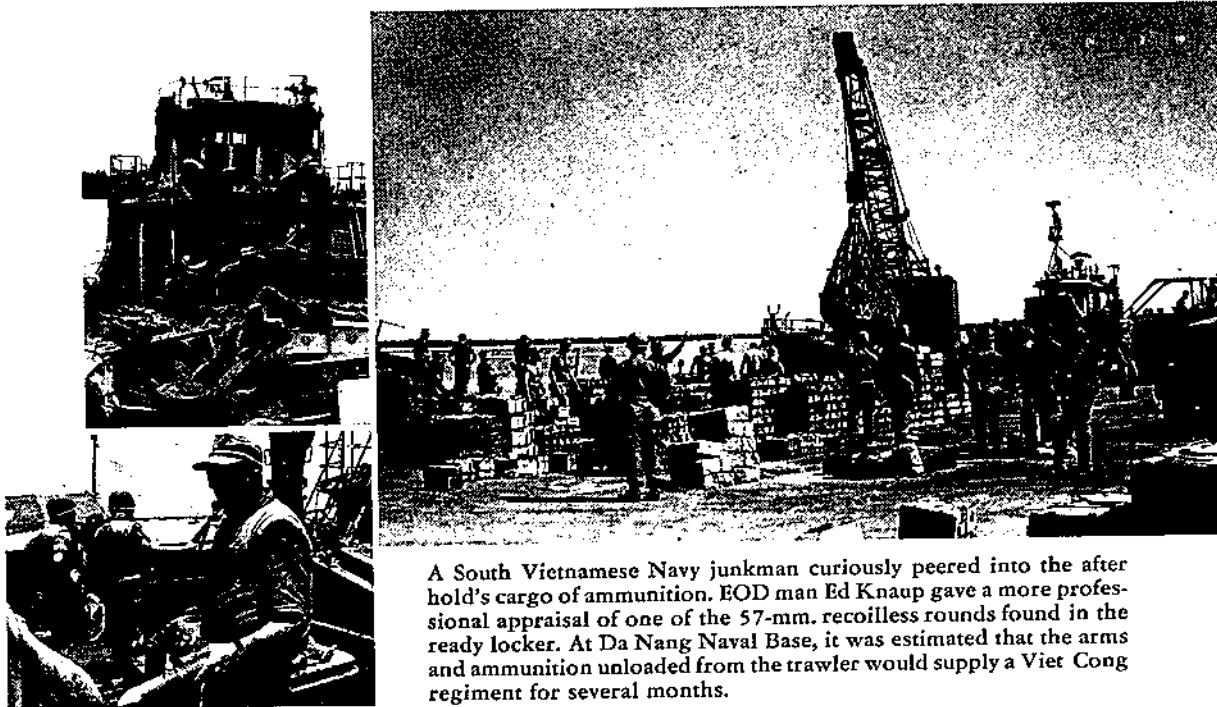
quently. At about two o'clock, the destroyer *Walker* was also assigned a fire mission in the area of the trawler.

So, for several hours, rounds fell around and on the trawler from many directions. About 0315, it became necessary to think about detaching the *Point Orient* and sending her back to Da Nang to go on her assigned patrol. She would have to rearm, her skipper reported, and he estimated that his ammo would be depleted in about five minutes. As the *Orient* completed firing, a relief for her was requested from COMCOSDIV 16.

At 0320, the *Point Orient* departed for Da Nang, having spent the preceding hour in close to the trawler, firing slowly, deliberately and quite accurately. At 0330, the *PCF-20* arrived from the next Market Time station north to relieve the *Orient*. At 0415, the *PCF-79* expended all her ammo and returned to Chu Lai, being replaced at 0430 by the *PCF-54*.

During the remainder of the night the five ships continued to illuminate the trawler and keep the fires on board burning. When, a little after 0430, the fires had almost completely died out, the two Swifts went in for close attacks, renewing the fires on board and brightening up the night again.

Dawn arrived at 0600 and full light by



A South Vietnamese Navy junkman curiously peered into the after hold's cargo of ammunition. EOD man Ed Knaup gave a more professional appraisal of one of the 57-mm. recoilless rounds found in the ready locker. At Da Nang Naval Base, it was estimated that the arms and ammunition unloaded from the trawler would supply a Viet Cong regiment for several months.

0630 when the *Walker* started a called-fire mission in several landing areas where the Korean Marines would be bringing in their security troops. By 0700, three junks from Vietnamese Navy Coastal Group 16 near Quang Ngai and three junks from Coastal Group 15 at Chu Lai arrived. The On Scene Commander transferred from the *Wilhoite* to the *PCF-20* and, in company with the other Swifts and six junks, started in toward the trawler. The helos which were bringing the security forces began arriving in droves at two or three landing zones. When it appeared that there were adequate friendly forces around and no fire fights within earshot, the *PCF-20* approached the trawler. We were confident that the initial intense rain of fire from the sea and air units in the first few minutes after the ship grounded most certainly must have prevented the crew from staying around to arm the destructive system.

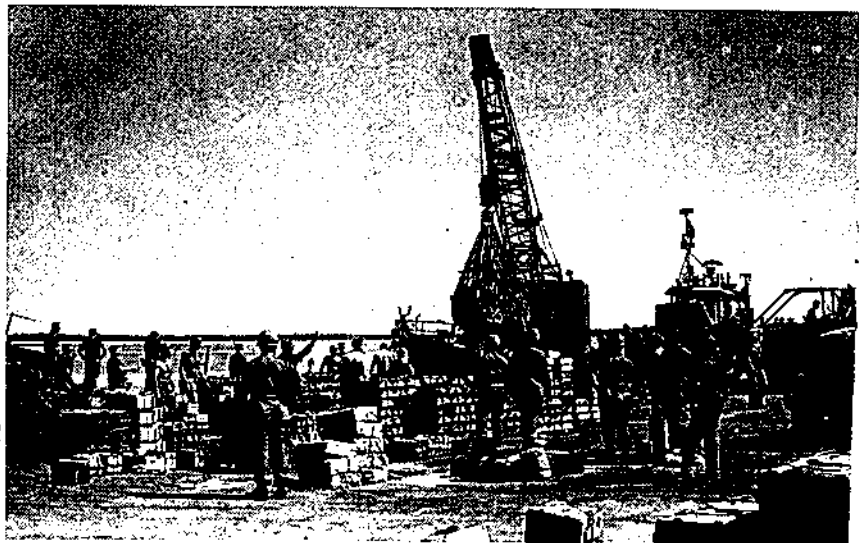
As we got near enough to read the bow numbers, I was stunned to read the number 441. I realized, however, that the North Vietnamese frequently change bow numbers to confuse our forces.

The water in the Sa Ky mouth is shallow and full of rocks. One huge flat rock that looks like a reddish brown lava cinder lies in the center of the river mouth. If the trawler

had kept to the south of this rock, she might have been able to get into the river. As it was, however, the white phosphorus round which the *PCF-79* put into the pilothouse put the ship out of control and she grounded about 75 yards to the northeast of the flat rock. Due to the presence of the submerged rocks and shallow waters, the Swift was picking her way very carefully toward our prize. The junks, however, reached the trawler and the Vietnamese sailors boarded her. Three U. S. advisors were with them.

The trawler had grounded in the ROK Marine Corps TAOR, so they felt more than a slight proprietary interest in her. This being the case, they decided it would be well if we would leave. After putting the request in terms that would have been very difficult to refuse, we retreated from the trawler and lay off for the remainder of the morning, watching.

The trawler appeared to be floating, except for being caught at one point at the stern. She was rolling freely in the swell. It looked as if she might float if she were pulled off the sandbar. The Task Force Commander was contacted and permission was requested to try to salvage the trawler and take her back to Da Nang. He replied "Bring her home!" Soon thereafter the Korean Marines were officially requested to help "assist the Navy" to salvage the craft. This they were al-



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ready hard at work doing—lightening her by removing all the weapons. When, late in the morning, all the weapons had been removed, U. S. Marine Corps CH-46 helos from Chu Lai flew in and landed on the big flat rock where the weapons had been stacked. They were loaded into the helos and flown off to the Second ROK Brigade Headquarters.

At 1300, responding to our request, the NSA detachment at Chu Lai sent two Mike boats (LCM-8s) to help salvage the ship. While the Mike boats were underway, the ROK Marines completed their work and left the ship to us to attempt to salvage. By this time, the Coastal Group 16 junks had returned to their base to fill an operational commitment, but the Coastal Group 15 junk men had remained to help.

During the morning the Vietnamese coastal minesweeper *MSC-115*, and the Vietnamese Gunboat *PGM-618* with their respective U. S. Navy Advisors on board, had arrived and were standing by to help. The water, however, was too shallow for any but the junks. Having transferred to the Coastal Group 15 Command Junk, we proceeded to board the trawler. As we neared her, a little smoke was still coming out of the vents that came from the living spaces in the after superstructure. The *Pledge* had volunteered to do the entire salvage job, but it was felt that the units of more shallow draft should try first.

It was expected that the holds would be empty when we arrived on board. Yet, incredibly, all the ammunition—amounting to many tons—was still there. The EOD man set to work immediately looking for demolition charges in the holds. He found them and disarmed them. The starboard bow numbers were checked and sure enough, there was a removable plate inserted in a holder on the bow. On the port side the plate was missing so there was no number at all. It was a surprise to pull out the starboard side plate and, instead of finding 459 painted on the back side, find, instead 418. After examining the 441 side more carefully it was clear that the number 59 had been washed with paint remover and painted over to read 441. The remains of other numbers could actually be read under the 59 if one looked carefully. Later, the port side bow number plate was found in the boatswain's locker under the

forecastle. It read 459 on one side and 418 on the other. The 59 had not yet been repainted to read 41.

Topside, the trawler was a shambles. The entire stern superstructure was burned out and riddled with bullet holes of assorted sizes. The contents of the living spaces on the main deck and the pilothouse on the 01 deck had been reduced to a grey powder. The starboard side gunwales were ripped and torn. Six large-caliber holes were found in the starboard side and hundreds of smaller ones.

Fishing nets, floats, and even artificial wooden fish were strewn about the decks, in a confused mess with tarps which had covered the holds, the hatch cover battens, fire hoses, and much more paraphernalia.

Despite her blazing appearance during the night, only the after section of the trawler had been burned. The paint forward had not even been blistered. The ammunition ready box, between the engine room skylights and the after hold was wooden, covered with canvas. The canvas was burned and the wood scorched, but the contents had not burned. Inside were many cans of belted 12.7-mm. ammo, and several 57-mm. recoilless rounds.

Expendable and exploded 12.7-mm. brass lay around the deck in profusion. Two exploded 5-gallon "jerry" cans lay near the engine room skylight. Almost the only identifiable thing in the pilothouse was a hand-thrown antitank grenade which was obviously there to be used to repel boarders.

The after 12.7-mm. gun on the 01 deck had been fired extensively.

The ship seemed to be aground either on the screw or the rudder. Most of the hull floated on the crest of each wave so that it rolled back and forth, the bilge-keel of each side bumping on the bottom with the passage of each wave.

Getting around the deck was very hazardous. Carrying a weapon was even more difficult. I put my M-14 on the Command Junk where it would be safe. I was soon to regret this action.

There were now six of us, four Americans, and two South Vietnamese, on the trawler. An attempt to pull the trawler free had failed when the lines from the Command Junk parted. There was nothing to do but wait for them to get more line from the *PGM-618* and

the Swift boats. On the big flat rock were the Korean Marines who had not yet been helo-lifted out. We also knew that there were still security forces in the hills surrounding the river mouth. We were not alone—yet—although the security forces were due to leave at 1600. We spent the next half-hour in going over the boat thoroughly for familiarization and for intelligence purposes. The holds were in good condition, although there were several 50-caliber holes in the after hold near the waterline, which leaked each time the ship rolled to starboard.

About 1400, we began to wonder when the junk was coming back. Looking seaward, the junk could be seen moving from one unit to another. Looking was about all there was to do. We had done everything possible until we could get something to pull on the ship. About that time, all hands on board discovered that they were thirsty, but there was no water in the trawler—our canteens were in the Command Junk. Also, there were radios on the Command Junk with which we could have communicated to the Swifts and the other units. I then realized that most of our weapons were on the junk.

We took stock of what weapons we had: one M-16 with extra ammo, and one hand weapon. We began to apprehend that we were somewhat isolated and not in a terribly comfortable position in case some sniper should sneak through the security forces. We learned quickly what every foot soldier knows instinctively: never get separated from your weapon. Suddenly, life on board a trawler—specifically, this one—seemed quite lonely.

But more pressing thoughts quickly dispelled our morbid speculations.

What, for example, would we do with the trawler when the security forces had to leave? It wouldn't be practical to leave a guard on her overnight. She would have to be illuminated all night to prevent the VC from boarding and removing the ammo. Destroying the trawler in case she couldn't be hauled off the sandbar had to be considered, also.

Preoccupation with these problems was interrupted when a helo landed on the flat rock and one of the several officers on board swam out to the trawler and climbed aboard. He was from the MACV Captured Materials



A graduate of Illinois Institute of Technology in 1952, Commander Stephan had risen to ET1 during his enlisted service from 1942 to 1948. He has served in the USS *Mississippi* (EAG-128), the destroyers *Shields* (DD-596) and *Lyman K. Swenson* (DD-729), and has commanded the USS *Tom Green County* (LST-1159). During separate tours of duty, from 1957 to 1960, and from 1964 to 1966, he participated in development and production of Fire Control and Guidance Systems for the FBM System, and Polaris Command and Control Communications. He was Senior Naval Advisor to the Vietnamese Navy in I Corps, and Commander, Northern Surveillance Group (CTG-115.1) before assuming command of the USS *Duncan* (DDR-874) in March 1968.

Exploitation Company and had come to take a look at the ammunition. He was very excited about what we had. After a thorough inspection, he left. His reaction strengthened our resolve to salvage the ship if only for her valuable ammo.

A few minutes before 1500, the *PGM-618*, *MSC-115*, a Swift, and the junks all began moving in our general direction, obviously feeling their way very carefully. Apparently they had arrived at a plan of action and were on their way to try it out.

At 1500, two LCM-8s came around the point from Chu Lai and headed straight for us. What a welcome sight! The landing craft were not, however, an instant solution to the problem. The only water relatively clear of rocks led up to the starboard quarter of the trawler. The Mike boats were blocked from approaching the bow by the many rocks in the water. Therefore, the Mikes tried at first to pull the stern off the sandbar. The boats pulled, but instead of pulling straight out to starboard, they pulled at a safer angle of about 135 degrees. This caused the trawler to slip aft and become more firmly grounded on the sandbar. After nearly an hour and several more abortive attempts, the lines were walked up to the bow to attempt a new approach. While all this was going on, the helos had arrived for the Koreans and the last of them disappeared over the horizon a few minutes after 1600. The Mike-boat crews were told, "There

isn't anyone left here now but us and the VC, so you'd better get us out of here pretty quick." Thus encouraged, the skipper of the LCM-8 boat, No. 852 took a heavy strain on the two lines from the bow, headed out on a slightly hazardous course, jammed the throttles to the bulkhead, and pulled. The bow started to swing, the trawler pivoting on her grounded point aft. Faster and faster she swung through the 135 degrees necessary to get her headed for open water. The Mike boat continued to tow the ship out farther and farther into good water. When about half a mile off the beach, she stopped, and each LCM made up alongside one side of the trawler. A stop at Chu Lai to have the holes patched was obviously necessary before continuing the longer trip to Da Nang. Thus, at 1630, LCM-8 boats, No. 852 and No. 798, started off at best speed for Chu Lai, the trawler tied securely between them.

At about 1700, our EOD man GMG2 Eddie Knaup, who was on board the trawler, noticed that she was no longer emitting puffs of ash and smoke from her vents, but instead was smoking hard. He entered the main deck living spaces and saw heavy smoke pouring out of a hatch which went down to a storeroom under the main deck. He knew that one of the largest demolition charges was in that storeroom. He lifted the hatch cover carefully and saw fire playing around the TNT in the storeroom. He dropped the hatch cover, and ran across the starboard LCM to a Swift boat which was made up and towing outboard of the LCM, yelling to the LCMs to stop in order to eliminate the high relative wind which was sweeping through the trawler, fanning the fires. He led out a hose from the Swift boat, across the LCM and then entered the compartment again, opened the hatch and stood there spraying water on the fire. By the light of the flames he could clearly see that the primacord wound around the center block of TNT was smoldering and might ignite at any instant. Still, he stood his ground and fought the fire. Meanwhile the Swift boat had called in the PCF-79, which tied up outboard of the port side LCM and led over a second fire hose. With this one, they soon had the fire under control and then extinguished. They checked thoroughly for any other sparks or smoldering fires before resuming the trip to Chu Lai.

At 2030, the trawler was tied up at the pier side at Naval Support Activity Da Nang Detachment, Chu Lai. A security watch was posted on board to keep off the curious and the souvenir hunters.

At 0430 in the morning of the 16th, the trawler settled stern first in the water alongside the pier, although the bow remained afloat. The water used to fight the fire had increased the draft so that the many small bullet holes near the waterline were now below the waterline. These holes permitted the slow intake of water, eventually sinking the stern.

This complication added considerably to the problem of handling the trawler. It had been intended to off-load her completely that morning, but not with the after hold full of water. She would have to be off-loaded and salvaged at the same time.

The support forces at Chu Lai did a magnificent job, and she was empty and afloat before noon. The holes were patched and she was ready to be picked up at the sea buoy next morning by the Vietnamese PGM-618.

On Monday, the 17th, the trawler transited to the Da Nang Naval Base of the Vietnamese Navy. That same day the Koreans turned over some of the weapons to the Vietnamese Navy. Others were delivered the following day—nearly a thousand in all. The trawler had carried over 1,600 weapons, some estimates ranged as high as 3,000—arms and ammunition sufficient to supply a Viet Cong regiment for several months, 90 tons in all.

One now hears this engagement variously referred to as "that trawler the ROKs captured" or "the Navy's VC trawler," or "that trawler the Huey's beached at Batangan."

The Sa Ky River Victory, as it is now referred to by the Vietnamese, is all of those things and more, because that battered hulk represents a victory of the combined Allied arms. The lion's share of the credit, however, belongs to the Operation Market Time Forces, who fulfilled their mission so professionally and admirably. But, a special word of praise is in order for the *Pledge*, and those Swift boats which patrolled within eye and earshot of the action, and, overcoming with exemplary discipline, an almost irrepressible urge to join the battle, maintained the integrity of their patrols. They also serve. . . .